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THE COLOR-SYMBOLISM OF THE CARDINAL POINTS.<sup>1</sup>

IN attempting to make any comparison of the colors used by various peoples as symbolic of the cardinal points, we are at once confronted by several difficulties. Although such symbolism was and is, presumably, widespread, it has been recorded, as far as I have been able to discover, only in North and Central America, in South and Southeastern Asia, and in Ireland. There is, therefore, not as large a fund of material as could be desired. Again, it is in some cases no easy matter to determine what colors are used by any given tribe or people for the different directions, as authorities differ widely, or make statements which may be construed in several ways. Lastly, we cannot be sure to how great an extent colors are confounded by the lower races. It is well known that, for instance, Blue and Green are not distinguished in the languages of some peoples, while others confuse Dark Blue with Black. Not that the difference between the colors is not recognized, but that the principles of color-nomenclature are different from ours. Knowing this to be the case, can we assume, for instance, that Green=Blue when we find two systems of colors which, except for this difference, are exactly the same? In the matter of Greens and Blues, it seems reasonable to consider the two systems, if not identical, as at least very closely related; but the equation Blue = Black is perhaps a little more doubtful. In the present discussion, however, no such equations are assumed unless expressly stated.

One of the first points of interest in this matter of the color-symbolism of the cardinal points is the choice of colors which was made by the various peoples. By this I mean what groups of colors were selected for this symbolism, irrespective of the directions which the colors were supposed to symbolize. Out of the thirty-odd systems of color-symbolism which I have been able to find, the most common color group is that of *White, Yellow, Red, Blue*; then in order follow, *White, Yellow, Red, Black*, and the two groups *White, Yellow, Blue, Black*, and *White, Red, Blue, Black*. These four groups together include nearly two thirds of the instances collected; and if we assume the equation Blue=Black, the first two groups coincide, and would contain some thirty per cent. of the total number of cases. This would seem to show no very startling uniformity in the choice of color groups; and yet, considering the large number of groups which *might* be formed with six colors, this proportion is relatively

<sup>1</sup> Paper read before Section H of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, at Columbia University, New York, December 28, 1898.

quite considerable. If we consider separately the American and the Asiatic instances, we find one important difference: whereas in the American symbolism, out of twenty-one cases, ten have the group *White, Yellow, Red, Black or Blue*; in the Asiatic the ten cases collected are quite evenly distributed among the various groups, and we cannot say that there is any group which is markedly preponderant.

But what has led to the choice of the especial colors used by the various peoples as symbols of the four directions? The factors seem to be four: the sun, in its rising and setting; the geographical position of the people in question; the climate of the region where they lived; and their religious ideas. Let us consider these in their order.

The colors of the East and West are the ones, as would naturally be supposed, in which the Sun plays the most conspicuous part. The colors likely to be associated with the Sun in its rising and setting are *Red, Yellow, and White*. Of these three colors, two are associated with East and West in some forty per cent. of all the cases under consideration; the proportion being considerably larger in Asia than in America. In many cases, however, *both* East and West are not represented by colors owing their origin to the Sun; and when this is the case, it is the East which, far more than the West, is associated with one of the three colors mentioned above. Considering the East and West separately, we find that among the American systems East is a Sunrise color in nearly ninety per cent. of the instances, among the Asiatic systems in about fifty per cent., and, taking the two systems together, East is still a Sunrise color in something more than three fourths of the total number of cases. West is designated by a Sunset color in something over one half of all the instances; and, considering Asia and America separately, we find the former now as overwhelmingly in excess of the American as the American was before over the Asiatic; the reason for this will become apparent later. The colors of East and West, then, are in the great majority of cases connected with the colors of sunrise and sunset, and both of them are so connected very frequently. But what is the determining factor in those instances where in America the West, and in Asia the East, is not represented by Red, Yellow, or White? This leads to the second factor,—geographic position.

All three other colors are given for West in America,—Black, Blue, and Green; and it seems possible that these can all, or nearly all, be explained by a single fact. In America, almost the only exceptions to the prevailing Sun-colors for East and West are in the colors ascribed to the West: in Asia, on the other hand, the excep-

tions are found mainly in the East. Now to the West of America, and to the East of Asia, is the Pacific Ocean ; and may we not assume that at least the Blues and Greens are used for West and East, in America and Asia respectively, in reference to this ? All the American tribes for which an explicit color-system is given, who use Blue or Green for the West, are situated in the southwestern part of the United States and Mexico, where, if they have not themselves seen the Western ocean, they have at least heard of its existence. There is perhaps one exception to this, — namely, the Dakota ; but here it would seem probable that the existence of a Western ocean was known to the people also. In Asia the same general conditions hold true. It is precisely among those peoples who abut on the Pacific, and among no others, that East is symbolized by Green or Blue. May we make even a broader equation, and say Blue=Green=Black ? That is, can we say that the existence of a large body of water, West of America and East of Asia, determined the selection of a *dark* color for these points ? Such a theory offers, it is to be feared, a too temptingly simple explanation of the matter ; for Black may be ascribed to the West for other reasons, as will be pointed out later. The equation Blue=Green may also be questioned, as in America Green is attributed to the West only in Mexico, and there West was, according to some authors, connected with grass and fertility.

As for the other cases where geographic position has apparently influenced the selection of colors, I must confess that the grounds are much weaker. In the symbolism of the Creeks, the Hopi, the Navaho, and in Mexico (following Acosta), South is represented by Blue ; and the same point is symbolized by the same color in Thibet and in the Buddhist symbolism of India and Ceylon. In one sense all these peoples have the sea to the south of them, and it is possible that here, too, we have the influence of the sea on the colors chosen for the cardinal points. But this suggestion must be regarded as merely a suggestion, and it is advanced only because no other explanation seemed to be forthcoming. If we include Green as a sea color, we should add to this list the Apache, Ojibwa, and Winnebago ; but with the latter two at least, and probably with the former as well, it seems fully as likely that the Green may be connected with vegetation.

The third factor suggested as possibly influencing the selection of colors was climate, and this shows most clearly in regard to the colors for North and South. In a little less than half the cases we find Red used as symbolic of the South ; and, with the exception of the Northern Athabascans, all these cases are found among *Southern* peoples or tribes. In the general symbolism of many peoples, Red is symbolic of heat or fire ; and the presumption is strong that, on

account of its very natural association with fire and heat, it was chosen as the symbolic color of the South,—particularly as the people among whom it is found ascribed to the South are those who would have the greatest amount of heat to endure. The other colors attributed to the South beside Blue and Green, which have already been considered, are *Yellow, White, and Black*. Of these there are, however, but few instances. Yellow was attributed to the South by the Mayas, according to Landa, and may perhaps, with White, be explained as the glaring light and heat of noonday; but this explanation is by no means satisfactory. Black as symbolic of the South is only found among the Omahas, I believe, and I have been able to find no reason for this seeming anomaly except in some particular religious significance which the South may have among this tribe.

It would seem natural that the North should be connected with cold and snow, and as such designated White; but it is only in about one fifth of the instances that it so occurs. Black, on the other hand, is used for North in more than one third of the cases, and as such seems to be connected more with storm and bad luck than with cold. This is well shown, for instance, by the Irish symbolism found in the *Senchus Mor*. Here the North wind is Black, and the winds intermediate between the North and West are Gray and Dark Brown, while those between North and East are Dark Gray and Speckled. Yellow and Blue, which are in some half dozen cases used as symbolic of the North, seem to have no natural explanation; the Cherokees, Apaches, and Omaha having the North Blue (the latter according to Dorsey), and the Sia, Zuñi, and Mexicans Yellow. The latter is also used for the North by the Thibetans and the Ceylon Budhists.

The last, but by no means the least, of the factors which determine the choice of colors, is religion. I have in this paper confined myself to the purely natural explanations which might be offered for the phenomena under discussion, and shall therefore not stop to consider any of the many religious ideas which have probably influenced men in the selection of the symbolic colors. I may, however, refer to a single cause of this sort, which would perhaps explain the ascription of Black to the West. The very frequent placing of the Land of the Dead in the West may, it seems reasonable, be the origin of the West being considered gloomy; it may also be a factor in the association of Black with North, as the North is sometimes regarded as a Land of Shades.

If we look over the list of American color-systems, and try to determine the representative color for each point of the compass, we find the result very unsatisfactory. There is little agreement

between different systems, and in some cases it is almost a matter of choice on any one point, so evenly are the different colors divided. But if we make such a composite as best we may, we get as a result the following :—

N. = Black (White); E. = Red (Yellow); S. = Blue (Red); W. = Yellow (Blue);  
in nearly all cases the relative frequency being so close that two colors have to be given. An Asiatic composite made on the same lines would show a rather interesting difference. In it we should have :—

N. = Black.    E. = White (Blue).    S. = Red.    W. = White.

There is in this case a much greater uniformity, and only one point (East) requires two colors, whereas in the case of the American composite every point required two colors. To be sure, in the Asiatic composite there are not nearly as many instances to make the composite from, there being only China, Japan, Corea, Thibet, India, and Java, although, from there being two or more systems for India and Thibet, there is a total of ten cases. Such composites are of rather doubtful value, however.

One more composite of this sort may be made, and with more profit and reason perhaps. If, instead of taking all the American tribes, and attempting to form a composite or representative system, we separate them into a Northern and a Southern group (understanding by "Southern" all the tribes of the Southwest, Mexico, and Central America), — if we make such a division, the task, which before was almost impossible because of such great variation, now becomes easy. We should have, following this plan, then, —

Northern Group, N. = Black.    E. = Red.    S. = White (Green).    W. = Red.  
Southern Group, N. = White.    E. = Yellow.    S. = Red.    W. = Blue.

Although the Northern group has Red for both East and West, yet the two groups are seen to be sharply contrasted; and they may each be said, with much more fairness than could be said of the first composites, to be a representative system for their respective regions. If we do the same with the Asiatic systems, we obtain a similar result. Taking the two groups of Northern and Eastern, and Southern and Central, we have :—

N. and E., N. = Black.    E. = Green-Blue.    S. = Red.    W. = White.  
S. and C., N. = Black-Yellow.    E. = White.    S. = Blue-Green.    W. = Red-Yellow.

As before stated, the comparison of such composites is of very doubtful value, but it is rather interesting to note the partial agreement of the Southern American group with the Northern and Eastern Asiatic group, if we shift the latter East for West (on the assumption of the ocean being the cause of ascribing Blue or Green to the

West or East respectively). If we make this change we have, then,—

S. Am. Group	= White.	= Yellow (White).	= Red.	= Blue-Green.
N. and E. Asia	= Black.	= White	= Red.	= Blue-Green.

There is one fact which the comparison of this symbolism of colors brings out, and that is, that there is little or no agreement between the various systems. But one case has been found in America of an exact agreement,—that, namely, of the Sia and the Zuni; a second case there may be, but it is doubtful, and will be mentioned presently. In practically every case, then, there is a difference between any two color-systems; and often greater between two tribes belonging to the same stock, and living almost side by side, than between two separated by thousands of miles, living under different environment, and totally unrelated. As an example, we may take the Omaha<sup>1</sup> and the Winnebago.<sup>1</sup> We have:—

Omaha . . . N.=Blue.	E.=Red.	S.=Black.	W.=Yellow.
Winnebago . . N.=White.	E.=Blue.	S.=Green.	W.=Red.

or

Apache . . . N.=White.	E.=Yellow.	S.=Green.	W.=Black.
Navaho . . . N.=Black.	E.=White.	S.=Blue.	W.=Yellow.

Here are two tribes of the same stock, living near each other, but with radically different color-systems; in the first case, even the color-groups are quite different. On the other hand, take the Northern Athabascans, as given by Petitot, and the Maya system according to one author. Here we have an exact correspondence, if we take the Athabascan system to be N.=Black; E.=Yellow; S.=Red; W.=White. But Petitot's statements may be interpreted in several other ways, and neither this interpretation nor any other will coincide with Landa's order for the Maya. The color-groups are, however, identical. In Asia there is more similarity between the systems of different peoples, but here it seems to be easily explained as due to the adoption of the colors of one nation by another, as, for instance, Japan and Corea, those of China; Thibet, the Buddhist system, etc.

The last point to be considered is that of "shifting" and "reversal." In many cases it happens that where two tribes or peoples have the same color-group, the one system is exactly the same as the other if one be shifted through one quarter or one half a revolution. For example, the Hopi symbols are the same as the Sia, if

<sup>1</sup> Both the Omaha and Winnebago colors are taken from Dorsey. I am informed by Miss Fletcher, however, that there was some misunderstanding on the matter, and that more careful investigations among the Omaha fail to show any color-symbolism connected with the points of the compass.

these are shifted one quarter sinistrally; similarly the Brahmanic system in India, or the Javanese system shifted similarly one quarter sinistrally, would be the same as Landa's Mayan symbols, etc., — the cases of exact coincidence, shift as we will, however, being very few. In some cases a coincidence appears if of two systems one be reversed, — *i. e.* if we read one dextrally and the other sinistrally, starting with the one point which bears the same color in both systems. Thus, for example, the Apache is the same as the Navaho if the latter is reversed; the Mayan = the Javanese reversed, etc. Or the two methods may be combined when quite a number of new coincidences appear; but the only value of these coincidences as yet seems to be, that they show that there are often several systems in which the same colors appear in the same relative order (or reversed): the tribes whose color-systems thus agree in part seem to have no apparent bond to connect them, however. If there were cases where two systems could be made to coincide by reversing one, and it could be shown that the ceremonial circuit of one tribe was dextral while that of the other was sinistral, then we might be inclined to consider the matter somewhat more carefully, but I have failed to find any such cases as yet.

As a whole, the results of such a comparison as has been made here are to some extent negative; diversity and not uniformity is the characteristic feature of the symbolism, and no general principle can be laid down as underlying the choice of colors by different peoples. It may be objected that this statistical method of studying such a subject is inadequate, and that the religious motive must be taken into account. That the religious element in the whole matter is of the greatest importance I do not for a moment wish to deny; but by neglecting for the time being the religious motive, which is necessarily somewhat local in its nature, and differs from tribe to tribe, we get a much clearer view of the general factors, which, modified by local influences, have led to the choice in any one instance of the colors associated with the cardinal points.

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